

OPM finalizes rule on direct hiring for acquisition workers

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The Office of Personnel Management on Tuesday published the final version of a rule allowing civilian agencies to bypass standard civil service rules when hiring for hard-to-fill acquisition jobs.

The rule is unchanged from a [draft version](#) issued in August 2005 that prompted 10 public comments. It does not apply to the Pentagon, which has separate hiring flexibilities for acquisition workers.

As of the close of the second quarter of fiscal 2006 on March 31, non-Defense agencies had used the direct hiring authority granted in the interim rule to fill five acquisition-related positions, an OPM spokesman said. That is the most recent data available, he said.

Agencies will be required to submit a report on their use of the rule, which implements a section of the 2003 Services Acquisition Reform Act, to OPM by Dec. 31. The personnel agency will send Congress a report on the authority's success at "attracting employees with unusually high qualifications to the acquisition workforce," the *Federal Register* announcement of the final rule stated.

OPM also could make recommendations on whether the authority should be extended beyond its Sept. 30, 2007, expiration date.

One comment on the draft rule expressed concern that agencies will use the authority to ignore job candidates eligible for veterans' preference. But the final rule noted that direct hiring authority can be applied for positions where there is a severe shortage of candidates, regardless of veterans' preference.

Another comment asked how people could find out about vacancies posted under the new authority. Agencies still need to announce openings on USAJOBS.gov, the final rule stated.

Bolstering the ranks of acquisition employees is a significant challenge for officials governmentwide as they prepare for an anticipated retirement wave. Statistics [published in July](#) by the General Services Administration's Federal Acquisition Institute indicated that retirement eligibility within the contracting workforce will nearly quadruple in the next decade, with 57 percent eligible to retire by 2015, compared to 15 percent in fiscal 2005.

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